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## Articles

# Attachment and Intrasexual Competitiveness in Committed Individuals From Chile

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## Abstract

The present research examined the association between intrasexual competitiveness (as an adaptive feature of human mating) and adult attachment dimensions (which develop throughout ontogeny and are relatively stable patterns of relationship approaching in adulthood), postulating that the dimensions of attachment will be predictive of intrasexual competitiveness (the negative perception of same sex-others as potential mating rivals), but in particular attachment anxiety should be correlated to intrasexual competitiveness. We assessed intrasexual competitiveness and the attachment dimensions (closeness, dependence, anxiety, and avoidance) in a sample of 323 adult heterosexual men and women which were currently involved in a romantic relationship and were married or in a cohabiting living arrangement. The results show the expected prediction of intrasexual competitiveness by attachment anxiety, but not by any other adult attachment dimension, suggesting that individuals who develop attachment anxiety are characterized by increased same-sex rivalry and competitiveness, which may negatively affect their same-sex close relationships, in addition to other interpersonal realms.

**Keywords:** working models of attachment, interpersonal relationships, same-sex rivalry, human mating

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Attachment styles have a prevailing influence on an individual's cognitions and behavior and affect the way in which one view oneself in interactions with others, as well as the expectations one has about how others will behave towards oneself (e.g., Collins, 1996; Gallo, Smith, & Ruiz, 2003; Hudson & Fraley, 2017). There is considerable evidence that attachment experiences impact the quality and stability of romantic relationships (for reviews, see Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010). To give just a few examples, Simpson et al. (2011) have shown that anxious attachment enhances romantic partners' cognitive and affective accuracy about their partner's thoughts in relationship conflicts, and tends to amplify the perception of non-agreeable romantic partner's behavior (by hyper activating negative affect), while avoidant attachment tends to decrease or deactivate this perception (Sadikaj, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2011). Barbaro, Holub, and Shackelford (2018) have shown that insecure romantic attachment is linked to sexual coercion in men and women. Kumar and Mattanah (2016) reported that having a secure attachment to parents provides a better quality of romantic

relationships in early adulthood, which is also associated with decreased romantic jealousy (Selterman & Maier, 2013), while anxious attachment is directly related to increased mate retention behaviors (Barbaro, Pham, Shackelford, & Zeigler-Hill, 2016). Similarly, according to life history theory (Belsky, 1997; Del Giudice, 2009), insecure attachment will increase the amount of investment an individual will allocate to compete with same-sex others in the mating area. In addition, childhood attachment insecurity predicts the development of emotion based self-regulation strategies as well as anxiety in adult romantic attachment (Pascuzzo, Cyr, & Moss, 2013).

Although there are many studies exploring anxious attachment and romantic couples, there is a lack of research on the relationship between anxious attachment and intrasexual competitiveness (i.e., the tendency to view same-sex others in antagonistic terms), a relevant variable in human mating. Accordingly, in the present research, we examined from a life history perspective if intrasexual competitiveness, is associated with adult attachment.

In general, the evolved function of attachment is assumed to create stable and reliable emotional ties that may aid in survival (Ainsworth, 1985). Bowlby (1982) viewed the attachment system as a robust feature of human social development that satisfies an inherent basic affiliation need. Bonding brings about closeness with, and dependence on, significant others, allowing the exploration of the social world and the development of autonomy from childhood into adulthood (Bowlby, 1982; Collins & Feeney, 2013). As proposed by Hazan and Shaver (1987) adult attachment serves the same function as early bonding, regulating care and proximity within close relationships. For example in the study of actual couple's conflict, attachment style and the levels of intimacy or closeness have multiple actor and partner effects within romantic relationships (Schudlich, Stettler, Stouder, & Harrington, 2013). Nonetheless, the fact that insecure modes of attachment (characterized by exacerbated anxiety or avoidance) typify about half of the population (Attridge, 2013; Ein-Dor, 2015) might at first glance be seen as evidence that many people are not well-adapted to their social world. However, as suggested by Ein-Dor and Hirschberger (2016) secure as well as insecure attachment styles provide individuals with different cognitive and affective tools to approach and navigate the social environment. In fact, according to Eastwick (2016) "...some seemingly negative outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction, conflict, jealousy, and breakup) might actually be adaptive because they promote reproductive success" (p.184).

The functions of secure as well as insecure attachment styles can be understood from the perspective of life history theory. As Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper (1991) explained, life history experiences lead to predictable variations in attachment style, which all may have survival and reproductive value under certain conditions. That is, unpredictable environments enhance attachment insecurity and foster a fast (short-term oriented) life history strategy, focusing on high quantity of mates, low investment in relationships and in offspring, and on short-term relationships (Belsky, 1997). On the other hand, predictable and high resource environments promote attachment security and a slow life history strategy (long-term oriented), focusing on high investment in relationships and in offspring, and on long-term high quality relationships (Belsky, 1997; Dunkel, Lukaszewski, & Chua, 2016). In stable contexts, a secure attachment style may, by promoting closeness and trust in others, help in building relationships that may foster the survival and success in life of one's offspring, securing appropriate caregiving and security (Collins & Feeney, 2013). In unstable contexts, attachment insecurity may nurture one's own survival and that of one's offspring in different ways, for instance by monitoring the environment and looking for and responding quickly to emerging dangers (Ein-Dor, 2015). The fact that especially avoidant attachment is associated with distancing oneself from close relationships (e.g., Collins 1996) may in threatening situations be quite adaptive (see Del Giudice, 2016). Indeed, Dunkel et al. (2016) have linked life history strat-

egy to romantic attachment styles, finding that insecure romantic attachment is correlated with a fast life history strategy and secure romantic attachment is associated with a slow life history strategy.

In line with the previous, we propose that a seemingly negative characteristic, i.e., intrasexual competitiveness, is typical of an underlying fast life history strategy, and may therefore be associated with anxious attachment. Intrasexual competitiveness is an important attitudinal variable reflecting the potential threat or the extent to which one perceives other individuals of the same sex as social or mating rivals (Buunk, 2017; Hill et al., 2013). Intrasexual competition has been studied as an essential elicitor of aggression that develops in adolescence, and that may lead to physical, verbal aggression, and hostility towards same-sex peers who are viewed as adversaries in the mating market (Buunk & Fisher, 2009; Campbell, 1999; Fisher & Cox, 2010; Muñoz-Reyes, Gil-Burmann, Fink, & Turiégano, 2012). Hence, the prevalence of intrasexual competition is exacerbated in adolescence, when general aggression is potentiated by hormonal changes (Fernandez, Muñoz-Reyes, & Dufey, 2014; Muñoz-Reyes, Fernández, Flores-Prado, Guerra, & Turiégano, 2015). Similarly, as a fast life history strategy is characterized by anxious attachment, favoring early sexual activity and short-term mating, it may logically result in increased intrasexual competitiveness (van Brummen-Girigori & Buunk, 2015; Dunkel et al., 2016).

In the present research we investigated the association between the four commonly distinguished attachment dimensions by Collins (1996) - closeness, dependence, anxiety, and avoidance - and intrasexual competitiveness, in a sample of both men and women who were on an ongoing romantic relationship. We examined first, if there were sex differences in the association between attachment and intrasexual competitiveness, expecting to replicate Del Giudice (2011) finding that women have more anxious attachment than men, and that men will be more avoidant than women. On the other hand, following Collins et al.'s (2006) results showing that a positive interpersonal approach is inversely related with attachment anxiety, we evaluated the association between intrasexual competitiveness and the different attachment dimensions. We expected that the positive dimensions of attachment (i.e., closeness and dependence) will be negatively associated with intrasexual competitiveness. In contrast, the negative dimensions of attachment were expected to be positively associated with intrasexual competitiveness. Grounded on the theoretical reasoning derived from life history theory, and the empirical evidence of a positive correlation between attachment anxiety and romantic jealousy (Collins et al., 2006; Pytlak, Zerega, & Houser, 2015), we expected that attachment anxiety would be associated more strongly with intrasexual competitiveness than the three other attachment dimensions and that anxiety would predict such competitiveness, above and beyond the other attachment dimensions.

Our design investigating both members of heterosexual couples is comparable with most of the literature on romantic attachment and relational conflict, jealousy, and similar issues (Barbaro et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2006; Simpson, 2017); however it is novel by focusing on the dimensions that characterize general adult attachment (and not uniquely romantic bonding), and on its link to intrasexual competitiveness.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 163 couples taking part in a larger study were included in the research, but three men did not complete all of the measures, so the final sample consisted of 323 individuals (160 men and 163 women), who were recruited through social networks and university postings. The mean age was 27.34 years (*SD*: 6.60;

range: 19 to 54). Most of the sample had at least some college education (only 8% reached high school only), with no significant differences by sex in age or education. An informed consent approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first author's Institution was completed and signed before participation, and all the instruments were completed individually at the Laboratory.

## Measures

### Intrasexual Competitiveness

Was evaluated with Buunk and Fisher's (2009) Intrasexual competition scale, composed of 12 statements targeting different situations reflecting a competitive attitude towards same-sex individuals (e. g., "I can't stand it when I meet another person of my same-sex who is more attractive than I am"). Answers were given using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all applicable* to 7 = *completely applicable*).

### Adult Attachment

Was assessed with the local adaptation of Collin's (1996) Adult Attachment Scale Revised (Fernández & Dufey, 2015). It is composed of 18 items assessing four dimensions of attachment i.e., closeness (e.g., "it is easy for me to get close to others"), dependence (e.g., "I feel comfortable depending on others"), anxiety (e.g., "I often wonder if others really care for me"), and avoidance (e.g., "I find it difficult to trust others"). Answers were given on a 5 point scale that goes from 1 (*not characteristic of me at all*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*).

## Data Analysis

We used t-tests to estimate sex differences on all attachment dimensions and intrasexual competitiveness. For the second prediction we performed Pearson correlational analyses to assess the relationship of intrasexual competitiveness and the attachment dimensions. Our third prediction was assessed using both, a linear and a stepwise regression in which intrasexual competitiveness was predicted by the attachment dimensions.

## Results

First, we evaluated sex differences in the attachment style of the members of the couples, observing that intrasexual competitiveness ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = .72$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), closeness ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = .71$ ,  $\alpha = .63$ ), dependence ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .73$ ,  $\alpha = .63$ ), anxiety ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ), and avoidance ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = .60$ ,  $\alpha = .72$ ) did not differ by sex ( $t_s < 1.581$ ,  $ns$ ).

Secondly, the correlation of intrasexual competitiveness with the attachment dimensions indicate that closeness ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and dependence ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were low and negatively associated with intrasexual competitiveness. In contrast, anxiety ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and avoidance ( $r = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were positively correlated with intrasexual competitiveness.

To test our third prediction, a hierarchical multiple linear regression was performed, showing that anxiety ( $\beta = .46$ ;  $t = 7.993$ ,  $p < .001$ ), was a significant predictor of intrasexual competitiveness,  $F(4, 318) = 22.007$ ,  $p < .001$ , while closeness ( $\beta = .58$ ,  $t = 1.157$ ) dependence ( $\beta = .73$ ,  $t = 1.448$ ) and avoidance ( $\beta = 1.07$ ,  $t = 1.284$ ) did not reach significance ( $ps > .05$ ). Next, a multiple stepwise regression also yielded anxiety ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as the only significant predictor of intrasexual competitiveness,  $F(1, 321) = 83.318$ ,  $p < .001$ ,

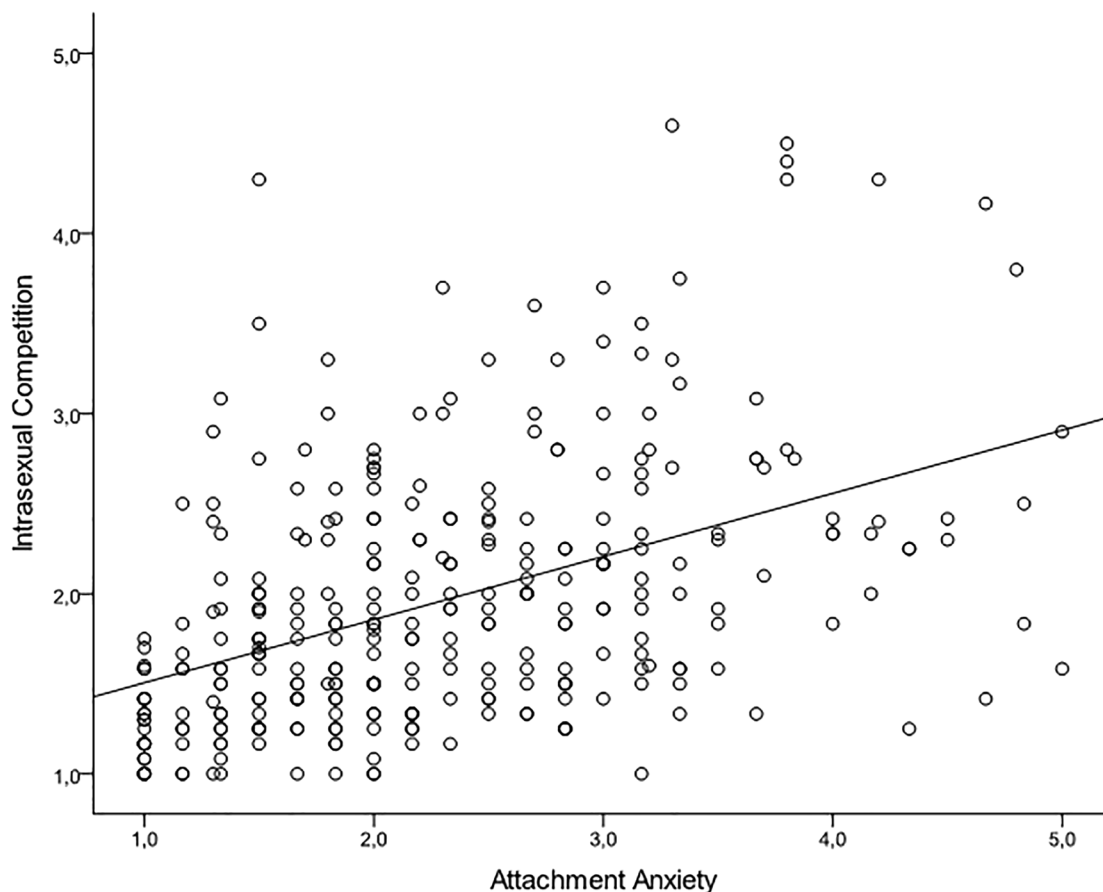


Figure 1. Intrasexual competitiveness predicted by attachment anxiety.

over and above all other attachment dimensions. Overall, a total of 21% of the variance in intrasexual competitiveness was predicted by attachment anxiety (see Figure 1), and no other individual variable or sex difference mediated this statistical relationship.

## Discussion

In the present research we assessed three predictions about sex differences in attachment, and about the relationship between the dimensions of adult attachment and intrasexual competitiveness in young heterosexual couples. We found support for all of them, with the exception of the expected sex differences in attachment. In line with our theoretical reasoning based on life history theory, we confirmed our main hypothesis that adult attachment anxiety is the most relevant predictor of intrasexual competitiveness in individuals who were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Our results indicate that the dimension of anxiety has an important influence on the extent in which individuals compete with same-sex peers over the access to mates.

Attachment anxiety develops throughout ontogeny and is an aspect of personality that primes perceptions of dangers and social hostility in general (Ein-Dor, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that anxiety is directly related to intrasexual competitiveness, while the dimensions of closeness and dependence are negatively associ-



ated to intrasexual competitiveness. Similarly, avoidance, which is a dimension of attachment that involves distancing the self from intimacy with others, does have a positive link with intrasexual competitiveness but not as strong as anxiety. These results point to the importance that attachment anxiety may have in configuring the interpersonal relationships with same-sex peers, which may have fitness benefits in hostile environments, influencing the individual to compete and be initially distrusting of same-sex others which may eventually become mating rivals (Ein-Dor & Hirschberger, 2016).

Our finding adds to the theoretical and empirical evidence of attachment styles as cognitive and affective working models of the self and others in close relationships (i.e., Collins et al., 2006), showing that attachment anxiety is a feature that is associated with competitiveness with same-sex peers. Collins et al. have explained positive correlations between attachment anxiety and romantic jealousy, and an inverse association between closeness and negative thoughts about close relationships with friends or partners. Our results extend the effects of attachment anxiety beyond the way we relate with romantic partners and family, to the realm of social relations with same-sex peers, friends, and coworkers. Showing that anxiety may bring about a predisposition to perceive the social environment of same-sex others competitively, is in line with the notion that experiencing childhood instability leads to the development of a fast life history strategy and attachment anxiety (Dunkel et al., 2016). On the same line, a recent study of virtual relationship building (Johnson & Bliwise, 2017), found that the effects of building a virtual relationship decreased attachment anxiety but had not effect in attachment security or avoidance, which is consistent with the notion that attachment anxiety is correlated with poor relational skills such as a competitive approach to same sex others.

Similarly, intrasexual competitiveness was initially validated and recently confirmed as a discrete feature of interpersonal behavior by its association with the Big Five personality factors (Buunk, Bucksath, & Cordero, 2017), and has been shown to be related to, general aggression and mate retention. In the present research we expand these findings by linking intrasexual competitiveness to adult attachment, i.e., individual differences that are stable throughout ontogeny, and may have an important survival value for individuals (Ein-Dor & Hirschberger, 2016).

Attachment theory proposes that individuals who experience unreliable caring and response to their needs early in life, may develop high anxiety in their relational styles (Collins & Read, 1990), resulting in conflicting interpersonal relationships and mistrust of others. This is consistent with our finding of an association of anxiety and avoidance with intrasexual competitiveness, while attachment closeness and dependence are negatively linked to such competitiveness. Byrow, Chen, and Peters (2016) have found that attachment anxiety is related to a difficulty to disengage from emotional stimuli, which in the realm of intrasexual competition may be linked to an emphasis on appearing better than friends, peers or coworkers; and focusing on the negative characteristics of others which may eventually become mating competitors.

Studying a sample of committed heterosexual couples implies some strengths and limitations that deserve attention. On the one hand, it involves equivalent number of both sexes, and similar general characteristics of the men and women in the research, all of whom were involved in a long-term relationship. This makes relationship status or the ability to establish a lasting relationship in our sample more equivalent by sex, which is important as this could exert an additional source of variability when assessing the attachment dimensions. However, by having a highly homogenous sample of couples, we may have lost some naturally occurring sex-typed individu-

al differences in specific attachment configurations that may have been attenuated or underrepresented by looking at couples and no single individuals (see results on Del Giudice, 2011; Dunkel et al., 2016).

Intrasexual competitiveness has been previously shown as a powerful individual influence on mating, motivating masculine direct aggression and combat, as well as mostly indirect or concealed forms of aggression in women (Fisher & Cox, 2010). Our results suggest that such intrasexual competitiveness may be influenced by childhood experiences that develop through life history and affect the dimensions of adult attachment, thus contributing to a better understanding of the developmental background of the tendency to approach same-sex others in competitive terms.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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